

DUDE, What's the Meaning of This?

CAL POLY GRAD DEFINES SLANG

BY JO ANN LLOYD

To find the definition and origin of the word “babelard,” it would be best to consult the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the accepted authority on the evolution of the English language, with more than half a million headwords defined.

But you won't find “broughten” anywhere in that massive 20-volume set. For that, you have to switch on your computer, and head to www.urbandictionary.com, the ultimate pop lexicon Web site created by **Aaron Peckham** (CSC B.S., M.S. '05) in 1999.

“I started it in my freshman year as a joke – as a parody of *dictionary.com*,” says the lanky, bespectacled 24-year-old.

It looked exactly like it, but there were major differences. Most notably, *urbandictionary.com* defined slang words and phrases written by Peckham and some friends.

The dictionary's irreverent, hip tone apparently struck a chord with young people everywhere, and its popularity spread “hecka” fast. Today the site gets some 100,000 daily visitors, many of whom also contribute words, definitions and opinions.

The dictionary's content has surged from its original 150 submissions to 333,000 words and 600,000 definitions.



Recent computer science graduate Aaron Peckham

Many words have numerous definitions. Check out “emo” and its more than 620.

More than a mere slang dictionary, Peckham calls *urbandictionary.com* “a living catalog of human interaction and popular culture written by normal, everyday people.” The authors are the people who actually use the words; they write their personal points of view. That gives the site authenticity, Peckham says. “And their writing is fascinating.”

Cal Poly English Professor John

Battenburg agrees. "Dictionary makers have always reflected the dynamic changes in language, culture and values of society at a particular point in time," Battenburg says. "Urban Dictionary reveals the views of diverse English language speakers and excels because it allows speakers to define their world."

Urban Dictionary documents slang and pop culture in a way that traditional print reference guides can't. No, duh!

"Phrases like 'wardrobe malfunction' and 'jump the couch' come and go quickly – too quickly for print – yet illustrate what society's thinking about."

What began as a one-man shop now has several thousand volunteer editors looking at 1,500 incoming definitions a day.

"Note to crowd": Urban Dictionary is not just for the hip, young set. Authors, judges and researchers use it as a resource for understanding popular culture, and some parents are turning to it to help them better relate to their teens.

In 2003 a judge in the United Kingdom was hearing a case in which one rapper claimed another had defamed him in a song. Urban Dictionary is cited as a source in that case, even though the judge admits that, after consulting the dictionary, he still couldn't figure out what the rappers were saying.

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Peckham points out that his dictionary also defines such everyday words as "conservative," "woman," "vegetarian" and "liberal." Just don't expect to see the usual definitions there. "They're very opinionated," he warns.

Peckham has written guidelines to help the editors maintain the site's purpose of recording today's language. And while he calls the site's best content "funny, insightful and relevant to everyday life," much of its content is not "G" rated.

"We allow racial and sexual slurs, but reject racist and sexist entries. Entries can



document discrimination but not endorse it," he explains. "People use slurs in everyday speech, so they should be published."

He also advises his editors to accept entries they disagree with or are offended by. A quick glance through Urban Dictionary confirms his editors are doing their jobs. For many, there's much to disagree with and be offended by.

Peckham allows misspellings and swearing and publishes jokes and sarcastic entries. He rejects inside jokes, references to sexual violence, and nonsense. Nonsense? Obviously, that's a subjective term.

Urban Dictionary wasn't Peckham's first Internet project. "I worked on a few Internet projects in high school, and I loved its ability to connect so many people. The power of the Internet to allow people to communicate and collaborate is phenomenal."

Peckham spends most of his time on the site, yet he still managed to compile material for his latest venture, a book titled *Urban Dictionary: Fularious Street Slang Defined*. The newly released book contains about 2,000 of the site's "funniest, truest definitions."

Peckham now lives in San Francisco and works at Google as a software engineer. "I love the company's mission: 'To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.' I think my projects have had a lot in common with that."

"Fo shizzle." ■

Test your knowledge. Below are words, phrases and definitions taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* and from *urbandictionary.com (UDC)*. See if you can identify which words come from which source.

1. **AGNIZE** – to acknowledge; confess
2. **BABEL** – buddy; pal; friend
3. **BAWCOCK** – a fine fellow
4. **BABELARD** – a babbler; chatterer
5. **BROUGHTEN** – expansion of the contraction "that's already been brought up"
6. **CARSOPHAGUS** – a pothole in the road so large that it tends to "eat a car"; a play on the word "sarcophagus" which literally means "body eater"
7. **FO SHIZZLE** – for sure
8. **GIGLIOTTI** – person who bosses everyone around and doesn't take guff from anybody
9. **GRATULATE** – to express joy at the coming or appearance of; to welcome
10. **HECKA** – very; exceedingly
11. **JUMP THE COUCH** – the defining moment when you know someone has gone off the deep end; inspired by Tom Cruise's behavior on Oprah
12. **KICKIE-WICKIE** – a jocular or ludicrous term for a wife
13. **NOTE TO CROWD** – a phrase used to attract attention to a fact or piece of information to the room at large, everyone in the area or around you. Derived from "note to self."
14. **PAKE** – the ingenious mixture of pie and cake
15. **PUTTER-ON** – an instigator
16. **RAG DOLLED** – a person playing contact sport and getting hit hard to the ground
17. **REECHY** – smoky; dirty
18. **SADDLER** – an attractive lady; a girl who turns heads
19. **RIDIN THE FLYEST** – to be surrounded by luxury
20. **WARDROBE MALFUNCTION** – an accidental or supposedly accidental failure of clothing to cover parts of the body intended to be covered

ANSWERS:

1. OED (1535) 2. UDC (2003) 3. OED (1599) 4. OED (1678)
5. UDC (2004) 6. UDC (2005) 7. UDC (2003) 8. UDC (2003)
9. OED (1556) 10. UDC (2005) 11. UDC (2005) 12. OED (1601)
13. UDC (2005) 14. UDC (2005) 15. OED (1552) 16. UDC (2005)
17. OED (1618) 18. UDC (2003) 19. UDC (2005) 20. UDC (2004)